TIVERTON CIVIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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S.S. Corfu docked at Southampton on 8th October 1945,
with 1,500 survivors from the Japanese prisoner of war camps on board.

Tiverton Civic Society Newsletter

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Committee Members and Members with Special Responsibilities

Janet Rendle	President
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Dennis Knowles	Vice Chairman
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Randall Thane	Membership Secretary
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John Rendle	
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During the Covid epidemic, our newsletter is being distributed by email. We hope to return to printed editions for those who prefer these after the epidemic is over. Some copies of the 2020 editions will be printed by Fax and Files for those requesting them at a future date.

Chairman's Introduction

Several members have stated that they considered our programme for 2020 had the potential to be our best-ever, and, coupled with rising membership numbers, prospects were very promising. It is therefore ironic that we have had our wings clipped by Covid-19 and it is highly likely that we will have needed to cancel, or postpone, the complete programme. We will obviously keep an eye on the changing situation, and we will seek to reinstate some of the talks as soon as practicable. However, present forecasts suggest that, given the likely speed and effectiveness of vaccine development, it could be well into next year before it is fully safe to do so. If this is the case, we will seriously consider the completion of a full programme for 2021 by holding regular Zoom meetings. Our Annual General Meeting this November is likely to be postponed, or held remotely, and we will keep members fully informed about developments.

Our small planning group has continued to submit responses for planning applications and consultations to Mid Devon District Council, to support and advise those who have valid reasons for objection to proposals, and to participate in some online meetings. This has been facilitated by relaxation of government rules on remote working and submission dates and, like so many changes to our lives, this model could well be retained after the crisis. Interestingly, and unlike some local authorities, there has been no discernible reduction in planning developments in Tiverton and Mid Devon since our last

Newsletter. Several significant and contentious applications have been submitted, including those for Tidcombe Hall, Tumbling Fields and Petroc, and the Mid Devon Local Plan 2013-2033, seven years in development, has finally been approved and adopted, an enormous step forward. The Mid Devon Design Guide Special Planning Document (SPD) and the Masterplan for Area B of the Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension SPD, have also been adopted, while controversial decisions concerning the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP) have been both divisive for elected councillors and confusing for all of us!

In addition, the government has recently published 'Planning for the Future', a major set of proposals which is designed to reform and speed up the planning system and to increase the number of new houses built, which Boris Johnson refers to as 'radical reform unlike anything we have seen since the Second World War.' If these proposals are all adopted as they stand, they could result in extremely negative outcomes for our community, including a 39% increase in the already large annual housing targets for Mid Devon, and we are therefore responding vigorously during the current consultation period, which ends on October 29th, both by submitting our own responses and by participating in online forums. **During this period of great change, we would be gratified if more members would volunteer to join our planning group, or the main committee!**

Civic Voice, our parent organisation**,** have been very proactive in recent weeks in running a regular series of extremely useful Zoom 'webimars', and

we have participated in many of these. Inevitably, many of them refer to the Planning White Paper and its implications, but I have also been participating in a very useful series of three meetings, which discuss social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and how these can be used to enhance and publicise the activities of Civic Societies. Over 60% of Civic Societies, including our society, now have Facebook pages, and a large proportion of these, especially larger societies, are very proactive. I would very much like to explore the possibility of increasing our exposure to these, but at present lack the time and expertise to do so effectively, having temporarily taken over the role of Treasurer in addition to those of Chairman and 'webmaster', and I would greatly appreciate any help from our members!

Neighbourhood planning provides the opportunity for communities to set out a positive vision as to how they want to develop in the future in ways that meet identified local needs and make sense for local people. The Tiverton Neighbourhood Plan, together with a Design Code and a Housing Needs Assessment, has been developed since last summer under the chairmanship of Ian Johnson, and three members of our society, Neil Purves, Mike Sanderson and myself, have been very actively involved, both by participating in the many meetings, latterly on Zoom, and by contributing many ideas, photographs and maps. I contributed several sections to the Neighbourhood Plan, including those on Geography and History, and also extensively revised the Design Code, while many of the photographs, both in the Neighbourhood

Plan and the Design Code, are those I took for the Civic Society website. Mike led the Transport Group, and he has made many other valuable suggestions; and Neil, in addition to several other extremely useful contributions, provided many photographs, especially of local views. The Draft Neighbourhood Plan has now been put forward for Public Consultation, and it can be accessed, together with the Design Code and Housing Needs Assessment at:

https://www.tivertonneighbourhoodplan.org.uk

During this period of consultation, we would greatly appreciate your feedback. Your comments could include completion of an online survey, and/or a message sent in through the contacts page, and details of both of these are found on the same web page.

Subscriptions! Although we have been unable to hold any of the meetings in our published programmes this year, we have continued to incur expenses, including insurance, website, and printing costs, as well as membership of Civic Voice and CPRE. It is therefore vital for the future health of our society that our income stream is maintained and that we retain our membership numbers. **We are therefore earnestly hoping that you will all remain members by continuing to pay your annual subscriptions, which are due by November 1st. Subscriptions, which are £12 for a single member, or £18 for two people from the same household, may be paid by cheque, we will collect them through existing bankers' orders, or they may also be transferred directly into the 'Tiverton Civic Society' account at Lloyds Bank in**

Tiverton, the sort code being 30-98-61, and the account number being 00255186. When the committee have assessed our finances, it may well, of course, be possible to make some refunds, although it would also be gratifying to use any surplus money to support other local organisations which are badly in need of support. A thriving membership will help us to develop a strong programme of talks, events, and activities in the future, as well as to positively influence developments in the local area, so please respond positively! **One plea: I recently needed to take over our finances at short notice and I would still greatly appreciate a volunteer to help or succeed me in this role!**

We hope you enjoy this Newsletter. It is very gratifying that our Secretary has provided a very interesting memoir of the wartime experiences of her distinguished father to coincide with the 75th anniversary of VJ Day. We are also very grateful to Pippa Griffith for continuing to contribute during what has been a very difficult time for the museum, and I am thrilled that Peter Maunder has answered the challenges I set in our last Newsletter by researching and revealing the identity and life of Fanny Nesbitt, the mysterious 'Beauty of Tiverton', who features prominently in at least four of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's early poems. Her identity has for long eluded Coleridge scholars and has now been resolved convincingly! We are already preparing the next Newsletter, which we hope will be sent out before the end of the year and, while we have received several contributions, including two

more linked to the Coleridge family, we need your input, so please submit your articles!

If you consider it safe to do so, please visit the fascinating current exhibition on 'Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots' in the Tiverton Museum, which reflects the research led by Lizzie Mee, who was to have spoken to us in June. This exhibition explores the rich multicultural history of Tiverton during different periods.

Please also consider purchasing the charming short memoir *Buscombe or A Michaelmas Goose* by R.D.Blackmore, edited by Douglas Rice. This can be purchased for £5 at the Tiverton Museum and Liznojan Bookshop, or it can be ordered from Douglas himself. Full details are posted on the Recent News Page of our website.

We greatly appreciate the efforts being made by Allies Mid Devon to raise funds to restore the 1888 drinking fountain in the People's Park: over two thirds of their target of £8000 has already been raised. Please email alliesgroup1@gmail.com, or contact Amanda Davies at 07946 937333 if you would like to contribute.

Jeremy Salter

Remembering VJ Day, 16th August 1945, 75 years later

On 16th August 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the Allies, bringing to a close World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, the Japanese held many allied prisoners (English, Dutch, Australian, Chinese and Indonesian), a high proportion of whom died during the period when they were forced to build the railway from Thailand to Burma (now Myanmar). Those that survived emerged emaciated and ill from the Japanese Prisoner of War (POW) camps that lined the route of the railway.

My father, Ted, aged 29 years when the Japanese surrendered, was one of the survivors. He is now buried in Tiverton cemetery. To celebrate VJ day and the end of World War II, I have written a brief outline of his experiences between December 1941 and September 1945 based on the private account that he wrote for family and friends while he sailed home on the first troop ship, S.S. Corfu, that returned from Rangoon with former Japanese Prisoners of War, and from the three letters he wrote on 29th August, 3rd and 8th September from the POW camp at Kamburi, the racecourse camp at Bangkok and from Bangkok Airport to his family, which reached them through the Thai Red Cross. I shall focus on the time of the Japanese surrender and the repatriation of former Japanese POWs but briefly cover the years leading up to that.

My father joined the Malayan civil service in 1937 having graduated from Cambridge University with a double first degree in Mathematics. His first post was Assistant District Officer (A.D.O.) in Kuala Kwangsi. When war broke out

with Japan on 8th December 1941, he was about to take up a new post as C.O. in the Land Office. He was posted to the Gurkha regiment as an officer, and was stationed in Cameron Highlands in central Malaya. When the Japanese invaded Malaya, his Gurkha unit fought a rear-guard action down the Malay peninsula to avoid being cut off from the main allied force, arriving in Pontian on the west coast where the Gurkhas were the last regiment to be evacuated to Singapore.

Singapore surrendered on 15th February 1942. My father's unit attempted to cross to Sumatra but failed. They were taken prisoner by Japanese officers who were kinder than most, providing them with transport to Changi POW camp seventeen miles away, and, crucially, supplying them with mosquito nets and blankets. From there, after two months, my father was transferred to Thailand in a goods wagon to Ban Pong, which took nearly four days, and then by lorry to Kanburi from where the POWs were route-marched to Chungkai. There work on the railway began. The next three and half years were increasingly gruelling as the POWs were moved further north towards the Thai Siam border through the jungle, working long hours from before dawn to after dusk building the railway. Rations were poor, accommodation cramped, dark and very basic, and even the sick were forced to work. By the end of 1943, my father was almost a skeleton and a very sick man.

In March 1943, my father and his troops were moved south by rail back to Chungkai, by this time an enormous POW camp, where they spent the next

ten months in better conditions than further north. My father's health improved but at this time he was among the sicker POWs. The fitter officers were drafted to Japan, with one officer to each draft of 150 men, route-marched across Thailand. My father was left behind as too sick to march.

Early in 1945, the remaining officers were separated from the men and taken to Tamarkan Camp outside Kanburi. My father left Chungkai on his birthday, 5th February. The conditions in Tamarkan were very cramped with over 3,000 officers living in an area 250 yards by 200 yards. On the day of his arrival, Tamarkan bridge was bombed by the Allies, and one bomb fell in the camp. Bullets and ack-ack shells flew everywhere, and one of the huts burnt down after being hit by an incendiary bullet. The POW officers were tightly guarded by Japanese and Korean guards, and sometimes confined to the huts because parachutists were being dropped in the area to train Thais for guerrilla warfare and insurrection against the Japanese.

In late June, the Japanese started transferring officers in parties of 400 to a new camp in the region of Nakhawm Nayok about ninety miles away. This involved a thirty-mile route-march which had to be done in 24 hours, which killed many. My father was due to leave with the last party on 23rd August 1945 but fortunately for him, the Japanese surrender intervened and he never left Tamarkan for Nakhawm Nayok. In his letter of 29th August sent from Kanburi camp, Ted tells his parents, 'I'm glad I avoided it [the transfer] as it

involved a thirty-mile forced march as well as numerous river crossings where the RAF have knocked down the bridges'.

The radio service which the officers had kept going through the war finally broke down in July 1945, when the torch batteries they had used ran out, and so the end of the war came as a surprise to them. They had expected it to continue at least until spring 1946. In his letter of 29th August, my father says that these radios had been kept going through the war 'very ingeniously constructed and even more ingeniously concealed'. He goes on to say that 'The fact that we had access to reliable news meant a great deal to us, especially in 1943 which was the worst year for me and, I think, for most officers and men in Thailand owing to the hardships which we had to put up with during that year while working on the Burma-Thailand railway'.

First, they heard rumours from the Korean camp guards (allies of the Japanese), and from Thais outside the camp on the morning of 14th August. The rumours became hotter on 15th August. The sixth party of officers left the camp on the afternoon of 15th August for Nakhawm Nayok. As they were leaving, the remaining officers got news from a Kanburi shopkeeper whom my father knew to be in possession of accurate information that the Japanese were about to surrender. They were officially informed by the Japanese that the war had ended in the evening of 16th August.

On 17th August the Korean guards were disarmed and the Japanese guards locked in the guardroom while the POWs provided pickets inside the camp.

On 18th August, the POWs were allowed outside the camp for the first time, onto the nearby common for an hour and a half. The food improved, and on 20th August they were entertained by a Thai C.O. at a police post outside the camp. The following day my father and his friend John (later his best man) went into Kanburi to listen to the wireless.

On 23rd August, 500 British, Dutch and Australian POWs arrived from the Burma-Thai border. They were in a terrible state, emaciated with many too weak to walk. They had been working even longer hours than my father and his men in 1943. One of my father's first tasks after they arrived was to help dig graves for four of the men. By 27th August, 15-20 of them were still on the danger list. The Japanese laid down their arms at 7.00pm on 23rd August and guard duties were taken on by the former POWs. A British officer, Captain Newall, who had been in London two weeks earlier, was parachuted into Kanburi and came to the camp the next day to answer questions.

On 29th August the evacuation of former POWs started. Eighty were flown from Bangkok to Rangoon. In his letter home of that date, my father noted that the war had finished just in time to prevent widespread famine in Thailand, and also informed his family that he was 'fit, and had been singularly fortunate in avoiding malaria when most people had been subject to repeated attacks'. He had had two attacks of dengue fever and had jaundice. He had had 'minor stomach troubles' as he put it (amoebic dysentery), but he goes on to say 'I think I can honestly say that for all practical purposes I am as fit and

well as ever'. He also had a problem with his teeth. Further on in the letter, he tells how he has made many friends in the camps and learnt to speak Dutch.

On 1st September, two Dakota planes appeared over the camp and dropped supplies by parachute from about 200 feet. In the middle of the night of 2nd September news came that a party was to leave for Bangkok to fly to Rangoon the next day. My father was put in this party five minutes before it left. He took a change of clothing, a mosquito net and some cigarettes. The train left Ban Pong just as day dawned. The journey was reasonably fast but there were long stops at two or three places between Ban Pong and Bangkok. In one place, the bridge had been smashed. The passengers changed trains, and this took three hours. The cigarettes were used to supply Thais who were enthusiastically greeting the former POWs all along the route. From Bangkok station, the river was crossed by ferry, and from there, my father was taken to the racecourse camp where Japanese officers were still in charge.

My father noted that the former POWs were getting good food for the first time. They had survived on rice as the staple food with meagre rations of meat and raw vegetables. Sometimes they were able to buy eggs from the local Thai population which he reckoned saved many lives. The Japanese rations to the POWs also included 'a small sugar issue, salt, tea and coconut fat or pig fat for frying'. The 29th August letter home stops abruptly at this point as 'a lorry is going off to Bangkok'.

Ted wrote another letter home from Bangkok, reassuring his parents about his health and that Thailand had plenty of food, unlike Malaya, where conditions were very poor and famine had struck. He anticipated that there 'the first item on the reconstruction programme will be dealing with the malnutrition of the last three and half years'. There was a shortage of rice in Malaya. In this letter, he noted that quite a few planes were flying over Bangkok evacuating former POWs. The aerodrome was small which meant that only small planes could land and take off. These Dakotas were the workhorses of the aeronautical world at that time. Each plane took 25 passengers, the maximum load that could be supported from the runway.

On 5th September, my father left for Bangkok aerodrome at 9.30 am. The journey there by lorry was one of the most nerve-racking he had ever experienced, with the Japanese driver crashing in to the side of one car and narrowly missing other accidents. The aerodrome was about ten miles outside Bangkok. At the airport, he had the pleasure of reading English newspapers and periodicals for the first time for nearly four years. He had drinks at the Thai airforce officers' mess, and ate European food for dinner, after which he wrote a brief third letter home. He slept in a bed for the first time for over three and half years. He received cards that had been written to him by the family as late as January of 1945, and noted, 'you managed to put far more news in your 25-word messages than most other people managed to do'.

The following day he left Bangkok airport by Dakota for Rangoon, and on arrival was taken to hospital, where he was kept until 10th September when he was transferred to a transit camp. At 8.30 am on 14th September he was put on a lorry which took him to the harbour and thence by assault boat to the S.S. Corfu. He left Rangoon harbour exactly a month after the Japanese surrender, on the first ship to leave Rangoon harbour with former POWs. On 18th September, the passengers sighted the mountains of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and tied up in the harbour at Colombo at 1.00 pm where they were given a tremendous reception. The following day my father went ashore and did some shopping before returning to the ship which sailed at 6.00 pm. On 24th September, the ship reached the Gulf of Aden. The weather was good which was a mercy as it can often be very unpleasant sailing through the Gulf of Aden. The ship called into port at Suez, and again received a tremendous reception. On 7th October, the S.S. Corfu reached Southampton, and a description of its reception in England was given in *The Times* the following day. My father reached home on 8th October 1945 to a rapturous reception from all the family.

Fern Clarke

Note: A local Southampton newspaper reported: On 7th October the *Corfu* arrived at Southampton with more than 1500 ex POW's who held been held by the Japanese. Relatives and the citizens of Southampton gave the men a magnificent welcome. The arrivals comprised men from 50 regiments, also naval personnel, and one member of the RAF. As they went ashore they were given a welcome home message from the King and

Queen, a bar of chocolate, 20 cigarettes, and a quantity of fruit. Enormous crowds cheered as they filed down the gangway many carrying presents for relatives and toys for children— and were motored to camp, where parents, wives, and sweethearts were admitted. The men looked pale and thin, but were in the highest spirits.

Collipriest Estate Part II

When the male line of the Courtenays, Lords of the Manor of Tiverton, died out in 1556, the feudal stranglehold of Tiverton came to an end, and a time of development and comparative prosperity began. The two manors of Great Tiverton and Little Tiverton, brought together under the Courtenay Earls of Devon before 1344, were divided between the descendants of the four daughters of the great grandfather of the last Earl of Devon, Edward Earl of Devon (1st of the 3rd [1485] creation / 8th of the second [1335] creation / 16th of the first [1106] creation). These daughters had married into Cornish gentry families: Tretherf, Arundel, Mohun and Trelawney (Sampson). The Trelawney family and to a lesser degree the Mohuns seem to have inherited that part of the Manor which included the estate of Collipriest. The estate of some three to four hundred acres lay roughly between the river Lowman to the north, the Butterleigh Road (Exeter Hill) to the east, the Holwells to the south, and the Exe to the west, with possibly a smallholding lying on either side of the Exe at the southern end of Westexe. The boundaries of the various tenements comprising the estate fluctuated greatly over the following centuries as parts

of the estate passed between members of inter-related families as marriage settlements, or were inherited in long leases, or were otherwise acquired as leasehold.

In 1605 John West, merchant, of Tiverton, bought 2/8 of the Manor from Sir Reynell Mohun (one of the beneficiaries of the Courtenays) for £2,700. At about the same time, West married Editha, niece of Peter Blundell, founder of the school. Thus the West and Blundell families became related by marriage. The Wests continued to hold their 2/8 of the Manor throughout the seventeenth century while the Trelawneys and their descendants, also beneficiaries of the Courtenays, held a moiety (half) of the Manor. 1/8 was held by the Colman family of Gornhay (who were related by marriage to the Deymans) and 1/8 was held (until 1768) by the family of Richard Spurway of Oakford who became the first Mayor of Tiverton in 1615. Sir Richard Vyvyan of Trelowarren, Cornwall, inherited 1/8 of the Manor. His portion was described as ‘messuage and tenement called Collyprist (40 acres), also 1/8 of messuages and tenements called Cranmore Castle and Foxbeare (160 acres) occupied by Robert Deyman, also 1/8 of a close called Harehill (3 acres), 1/8 of 4 closes called Waysground (13 acres), 1/8 of 2 closes called Rugsmarshes (11 acres), 1/8 of those fulling mills thereon lately built, 1/8 of a close called Fernham (7 acres), 1/8 of 5 closes called the marshes and the demesnes of Collyprist (60 acres), also 1/8 of 7 closes called King’s meadow (30 acres).’ This total of 324 acres probably represents the entire Collipriest estate and a 1/8

part (40 acres) is more likely to be the extent of the holding that Sir Richard Vyvyan leased 'to Henry Newte and William Leigh, yeomen of Tiverton' in 1640/1.

The manor of Tiverton is given as 4474 acres in the Domesday Book, and the share of the Trelawney descendants was probably disposed of by the early 1600s. Much of the Collipriest estate which evidently formed part of the Trelawney portion was already held on a long lease by the Deymans (who also held land in Elmore adjoining the estate). In 1622/3, on payment of substantial fines, the Deymans and the Blundells, with whom the Deymans were closely connected, acquired half the estate including 'demesnes, marshes, meadows, half a tenement called Cranmore Castle, ½ of Colleprist, ½ of a cottage in St. Andrew St., also ½ goods of felons, ½ of heriots etc.' At the same time, the Deymans and the Colmans (related by marriage) acquired further property, perhaps the remainder of these holdings.

By 1630, the Manor of Tiverton was held by some forty representatives in common, and it is not possible to differentiate between the owners of the parts of the Manor in order to determine the identity of different lessees and tenures.

Mary Toft

Fanny Nesbitt: 'Beauty of Tiverton'; scion of a military family

In 1763, in a bid to repair the public finances in the wake of the Seven Years War, the Government proposed the introduction of a tax on cider. An inflammatory move, the Cider Bill caused widespread disquiet and unrest in the Westcountry. Faced with such opposition, in August 1763, Colonel Oughton's Regiment (31st Foot), which had been quartered at Portsmouth, was ordered to Exeter.[1] The regiment evidently overwintered in Tiverton, for no fewer than five soldiers' weddings are recorded in the parish register between November 1763 and March 1764. Romance was not, however, confined to the 'other ranks'. A young officer, Lieutenant Alexander Nesbitt, fell for a 24-year-old Tiverton girl, Sarah Blundell. Born on 4 December 1740, the daughter of Philip Blundell (1687 – 1747), Sarah was one of the last generation of the noted Tiverton family whose forebears included Peter Blundell, founder of the school. Although his regiment left Tiverton in the spring of 1764, Alexander and Sarah's love endured, and the young couple were married at St Peter's Church on 3rd March 1765.

Within weeks, news arrived that the 31st Foot was to be posted overseas, to Pensacola, West Florida, a territory ceded by Spain to Britain under the Treaty of Paris at the end of the Seven Years War. Today a popular sun-trap for holidaymakers, Florida at this period was dubbed a 'graveyard for Britons'. The regiment disembarked in August 1765 into a pestilential hell, a fatal cocktail of yellow fever, dysentery, typhus and malaria. In the months of

August and September 1765 alone, one fifth of the Europeans in Pensacola died. Within a month, the 31st Foot had buried four officers and five out of the six officers' wives, as well as almost 100 men. Sarah Nesbitt was among the dead.[2]

In spite of this calamitous beginning, the 31st Foot remained in Florida, conditions gradually improving. Alexander Nesbitt was promoted captain in 1769. In 1772, the regiment was posted from Florida to the island of St Vincent, to engage in the First Carib War, and did not return to England until 1774. Meanwhile, during his lengthy absence overseas, Alexander Nesbitt must have despatched his younger brother Richard to Tiverton on his behalf to visit his late wife's family. Richard Nesbitt, a 34-year-old captain in the 63rd Foot then stationed in Ireland, fell for Sarah's 25-year-old younger sister Ann Blundell and they were married at St Peter's Church on 24th January 1773. Richard and Ann Nesbitt proceeded to Ireland, their first child, a daughter, Frances Blundell Nesbitt (Fanny) being born there towards the end of 1773. A son, William, followed two years later.

This picture of peacetime domesticity was soon to be shattered by events across the Atlantic. In February 1775, the British Government declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion. On 7 April, the 63rd Foot was embarked at Cork for America, arriving in Boston Harbour on 13 June 1775. Given what happened to her sister, it seems highly unlikely that Ann, now with two small children, would have accompanied her husband. She either

remained in Cork, or more likely returned to Tiverton to live with her brother Philip Blundell (1744 – 1822), one of the last of the family to live in the town, characterised by Richard Nesbitt as a man of 'affluence and benevolence'.

Within just four days of Captain Richard Nesbitt's arrival in Boston, the 63rd Foot was engaged in the battle of Bunker Hill, sent into the fray to support the rear of the British forces which expelled the colonial rebels from their stronghold overlooking the harbour, at a considerable cost in casualties. Postings to New York followed, and Captain Nesbitt was severely wounded in the shoulder during the storming of Fort Clinton on 6th October 1777, an action in which the 63rd's Major Francis Bushill Sill was killed, along with 40 soldiers. As senior captain, Nesbitt was next in line for promotion to major but was passed over. A colleague, Captain William Haslewood wrote in his diary 'Capt Nesbitt is treated very ill in not succeeding to the majority, being the eldest captain in the 63rd regiment'. After briefly being transferred to Philadelphia, the 63rd was evacuated back to Ireland, arriving at Cork on 4th June 1778 for some well-deserved home leave.[3]

Richard Nesbitt almost certainly made his way straight to Tiverton to see his wife and children. His injury together with his shabby treatment must have greatly exercised him. The 31st October 1778 issue of the *London Gazette* announced the compromise outcome. Captain Nesbitt was promoted major in the 63rd, and then immediately replaced by Captain James Wemyss. It seems

that by agreement Nesbitt resigned his commission on receipt of his deferred promotion.

The Nesbitts now settled down to a life of comfortable retirement in Tiverton. A further four children were born to the couple between 1779 and 1790, three daughters and a son. The family took a lease on a large house on the north side of Gold Street, immediately below the Cross Keys Inn. Owned by John Weech, it sported a substantial 47-foot frontage, with a large walled garden to the rear. Long since demolished, the house occupied the site of the present numbers 34/36 Gold Street.

In the Austenesque world of the genteel late eighteenth century, Tiverton was something of a haven for retired military and overseas folk. No doubt the town offered the kind of polite society which they found appealing. When Col. John Gabriel Stedman settled at Hensleigh in April 1785, Major Nesbitt was one of the first people to call on him. Stedman recorded in his diary that Nesbitt had 'sold out of the army'.[4] In November 1789, Stedman dined at Nicholas Dennys' house in Westexe and among the company of fourteen was Miss Nesbitt, although then only sixteen years old, already out in society.[5] Richard Nesbitt's eldest son William attended Blundell's School for two years from 1788 before being found a position in the marine service of the East India Company. Meanwhile, Richard's older brother Major Alexander Nesbitt had come to Tiverton to live with him, and by 1790 felt sufficiently attached to the town to add his name to the list of subscribers to Martin Dunsford's

History of Tiverton published that year. No doubt both Majors Nesbitt were among the first callers on half-pay Capt James Coleridge (1759 – 1836) of the 6th Regiment of Foot, when he and his wife settled at No. 54 St Peter Street in 1789.

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834) was a frequent visitor to Tiverton during the early 1790s, staying with his eldest brother James during his university vacations. Travelling to the town in July 1793 on a coach from Exeter for a ten-day stay, he met Fanny Nesbitt, describing her in a letter to his brother George as 'a very pretty girl'. Samuel asked if George knew Fanny, the implication being that the Tiverton Coleridges and the Nesbitts were on intimate terms. By then Fanny, aged almost twenty, just a year younger than the poet, had been out in society for four years. Fanny was just one of several 'young belles' in Tiverton with whom he flirted and for whom he composed poems. Coleridge's infatuation with Fanny Nesbitt may have been short-lived, and one wonders whether his feelings were reciprocated, but there can be no doubt that as Coleridge's fame grew, Fanny would have cherished her memories of their brief encounter that summer.

It would be nine more years before Fanny found a suitable match in Richard Henry Strong, a solicitor, partner in the leading Tiverton firm of Wood & Strong. They were married at St Peter's Church on 6th September 1802, and made their home at 3 Fore Street, between Benjamin Dickinson's mansion and St George's churchyard.

In 1806, both Majors Nesbitt died and they were buried together in St George's churchyard where their memorial remains to this day. Soon after the death of her husband, Richard's widow Ann gave up the Gold Street house, moving into more compact accommodation a few doors up the street, the other side of the Cross Keys. She still had four unmarried children under her roof. Fanny was well provided for by her father, being left £600 on top of the £500 in the Funds which formed part of her marriage settlement. The residue of his estate went to his four unmarried children.

Richard and Fanny Strong had six children, four boys and two girls, two of whom went on to pursue military careers. Richard had a successful legal practice in the town, and was town clerk and a member of the town's corporation, by then very nepotistic and inward-looking. By 1817 the family had relocated from Fore Street to the elegant newly-built Clare House in Newport Street (today's doctor's surgery). In 1819, Strong was able to use his influence to prevail upon the Earl of Harrowby to recommend his eldest son, Nesbitt Strong, to a position as a cadet in Bombay in the service of the East India Company.[6] Sadly, not long afterwards, Richard developed an ulcer in his arm which caused a lingering illness which eventually proved fatal. He died in January 1822 aged just 44.[7]

In 1822 Fanny lost two other near relations, her mother Ann and her wealthy uncle Philip Blundell. The latter, who lived at 'The Lodge' (Alexandra Lodge) for many years, had accumulated a very considerable fortune, much of which

was divided between his Nesbitt nieces and nephews and their children. Fanny and her family received specific legacies of £9,000 in addition to a share in the residue of Philip's estate. Under the terms of her husband's will, all Richard's property was to be sold, including Clare House, and perhaps Fanny sought some solace by returning to live in her old childhood home in Gold Street. The large house, now owned by Thomas Forwood of Warnicombe, John Weech's heir, had been divided into two separate dwellings, Fanny taking up residence in one half, alongside John Venman, a tailor, who occupied the other. In 1827, when he reached the age of 21, Fanny's son Richard Henry Strong junior, was purchased a commission as ensign in the 26th Regiment of Foot.[8] One of Fanny's daughters, Frances Maria, married Irishman Peter Brown, a lieutenant in the 3rd Regiment of Foot (the Buffs).

In July 1832, Thomas Forwood died dramatically whilst addressing a crowd from a window of the Angel Hotel at an election hustings, aged just 37. A burst aneurysm caused blood to gush forth from his mouth and he died instantly. He was supporting his cousin Henry Weech Burgess, a candidate in the first free parliamentary election to be held in Tiverton. Complications arising from Forwood's early death and the absence of a will ultimately resulted in Fanny and her family being required to vacate their Gold Street home. They relocated to a newly-built house on the corner of Bampton Street and Newport Street (the present corner house known as 62 Bampton Street

and 23 Newport Street). Fanny's third son, Charles Blundell Strong, had chosen a legal career like his late father, operating his practice from his mother's home, which he shared with his wife and young family. In a town in which no fewer than eighteen solicitors were listed in White's Directory for 1850, his chosen profession must have provided slim pickings. Fanny remained in Bampton Street until her death in October 1852, at the age of 79.

After Fanny's death, Charles packed up and abandoned his failing legal practice in Tiverton. All four of his sons had been educated at Blundell's, the three who were still there were removed from school in 1852. His family presumably in tow, Charles embarked upon an extraordinary tour of the world, travelling to Bombay, returning to live near Bath, then off again to Wellington, New Zealand, then Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, returning once more to live near Bath. By 1857, his money exhausted, Charles ended up in gaol in Taunton, imprisoned for debt. His wife seems to have left him, at least one of his children remaining in New Zealand where, in 1859, he was tragically killed in a shooting accident. Charles himself retired to Budleigh Salterton, but died in Exeter in 1862.[9]

Frances Blundell Nesbitt was interred in St George's churchyard no doubt next to her late husband Richard Strong, but her name is not inscribed on his memorial stone, nor is it on the stone of her late father and mother. When she died, most of her children were overseas and her son Charles seems to

have had other priorities than to arrange for an appropriate inscription to the one-time “Beauty of Tiverton”.

Peter Maunder

[1] Ipswich Journal, 6th August 1763.

[2] Rea, Robert R., 1969, ‘Graveyard for Britons, West Florida, 1763-1781’, The Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 47, pp.345-64. Haldimand Papers, BL Add MSS 21,673, fol. 20. Mrs Nesbitt is listed among the five officers’ wives in the “Return of the Deceased”, deaths relating to the 31st Foot between 25th July 1765 and 10th July 1767 at Pensacola, Florida.

[3] Kellogg, Louise Phelps.1920. *Journal of a British Officer during the American Revolution,* The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. 7, pp.51-8.

[4] Thompson, S. 1962. The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman, p.258.

[5] One of the other dinner guests was Miss Eliza Cowley, who tragically died the day after the dinner party. She was sixteen years old (Stedman ibid, p329).

[6] Captain Nesbitt Strong died in India in 1841.

[7] Taunton Courier, 23rd Jan 1822.

[8] Richard Henry Strong junior retired from the 26th Regiment of Foot as Paymaster, in 1843.

[9] Western Times, 3 October 1857.

People's Park

With the Covid 19 pandemic, many of us have appreciated outdoor spaces this summer. This has prompted us to investigate the history of Tiverton's People's Park for this issue.

The park was established to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 as the first of Tiverton's three public parks. The core of the park was an area of land called Govett's Field, with an adjoining piece of land added. The purchase of the land was supported by John Coles and subscriptions from over 1,500 local people. Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life holds a number of documents and deeds relating to the establishment of the park, including an early plan for the layout of the park which incorporated some land to the west known as the 'Park' for many years.

The toll house at the north end of the park was adapted into a Park Keeper's house by one of the three entrances to the park. A booklet written to raise funds for the park notes that four acres of the fields were to be laid out as a promenade and children's playground, and two and half acres to be reserved for a boys' recreation ground.

The park has been furnished with a number of features over the years, including a bandstand presented by Alderman Lane (no longer in existence), the drinking fountain presented by Rev. Hadow and the canon which was used as scrap metal in the Second World War.

The opening celebrations on July 5th 1888 included a lunch and a flower show which included 'horse jumping, a traditional English fair and novelty entertainments.'

The early rules of the park included:

4. No person shall, except by permission of the Committee, enter, pass through, or be in the Park with horses, carts, carriage, waggons, spring-vans or barrows, or shall use the Park in conveying merchandise or goods of any description; or bring into, or lead or drive through, or keep in the Park any cattle, sheep, pigs, fowls, or other animals (except dogs) without the permission of the Committee.

9. No persons should be allowed to bring or use in the Park any bicycle, tricycle or velocipede. Except on a track that may be prescribed for the same, and then only during such hours as may be allowed therefore.

10. No person shall play at football, cricket, or any other game except in parts of the Park as may be allowed for that purpose; and the Committee may at any time set apart any portion of the Park as a play-ground for the exclusive use of males or females.

16. No person shall within the Park, beat, shake or clean any carpet, mat or rug; or use it as a drying or bleaching ground any part of the Park.

19. No person shall capture any bird, or take or disturb any bird's nest in the park; nor shall wilfully disturb or ill-treat any animal therein.

20. No person shall deposit or leave in the Park, any stone, refuse or dead animal.

George Harper was appointed as Park Keeper in 1887. The terms of the job included that ‘applicants must be able-bodied and respectable men’ who applied using their own handwriting and could provide two testimonials. The Park Keeper and his family would live in the cottage on the grounds with eight to nine perches of garden ground rent free with a weekly wage of fifteen shillings.

The park has been the site of many town merriments over the years with various teas and events laid on for Royal celebrations and other occasions.

Pippa Griffith

An early plan of the park drawn up by the surveyor McDonald

A postcard showing the Park Keeper's house

A busy day around the band stand, c. 1900

Cliff Gratton and Joseph Janes playing on the canon, c. 1930s